

Review - Spaces of Aid: How Cars, Compounds and Hotels Shape Humanitarianism

Written by Bertrand Taithe

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BERTRAND TAITHE, JUL 16 2015

Spaces of Aid: How Cars, Compounds and Hotels Shape Humanitarianism

By: Lisa Smirl

London: Zed Books, 2015

Methodological innovation in a field of research is often the product of something new, something old and something borrowed. What makes the late Lisa Smirl's book so innovative is not that it is entirely new but rather that it brings to a field still in the making a range of methodological techniques which have a strong track record elsewhere. Many will be familiar with her work through the website which hosts many of her articles and which illustrates just what an immense loss her premature death has been for the scholarship of humanitarianism and humanitarian aid. Lisa Smirl brought to this interdisciplinary field of research a clear and acute understanding of what methods developed for a wide range of disciplines might bring. In particular humanitarian studies suffers from lack of spatial awareness (perhaps as a result of too acute a focus on international relations) and many books present the history or politics of humanitarianism as distinct from where aid is delivered or how it is delivered. Conversely the 'grey' literature produced by practitioners tends to have the reverse attitude of presenting technocratic assessments of deployment, facilitation and mediations which often pay lip service to the human realities and difficulties experienced by both recipients of aid (beneficiaries) or those delivering relief or development (expats and national staff).

Smirl challenges both sets of literatures, which have merits of their own, by engaging with the fundamentals of what the 'field' might be when it comes to humanitarian work. Of course anthropologists and geographers are familiar with their understanding of 'the field' and many of their debates and controversies are thus relevant and explored here, but it is through an actor network theory (ANT), inspired by the work of Bruno Latour, that she chose to unpack how the humanitarian field is constituted. In ANT of course, Latour stressed the 'agency' of objects, the importance of spatial design or how the lab shapes knowledge, how experimental gestures and objects define what can be known. In the history of science this led historians to consider the instrument makers in parallel to the better known 'great' scientists. It is testimony to how recent the field of humanitarian studies is; that such beautifully simple notions should only emerge in 2015! Yet these ideas go rather further than mundane observations: many critiques or jaundiced practitioners have long deplored the blurred view of the world one gets from the inside of a fast travelling Toyota land-cruiser, many observers have been alarmed at the ever increasing self-restrictions security imposes on the humanitarians, and many humanitarian accounts have focused on how this enclosed sociability enables or disables 'good work'.

Looking at the compounds and the car as spaces of 'field production', as agents in their own rights which shape the world in which humanitarians may act, enables Smirl to offer a considerably more subtle engagement with the spatial imagining of humanitarian work.

Smirl starts from humanitarians' self-perceptions through a consideration of the now very considerable literature devoted to memoirs or denunciations—often combining both. It is not entirely true that this literature has hitherto not been considered and this first chapter sits a little at odds with the rest of the book. As a whole, it is not to take anything from it to admit that it does feel a little disjointed. The second chapter is thus devoted to securitization,

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subject to considerable anxieties among practitioners and one of the most important focal points in scholarly attention in the recent years, bringing in particular relief the need to consider risk perception as a social and cultural product of a specific space. The space of the bunker or the 4×4 are at the heart of this exploration.

The co-location of staff in protected enclaves, and sometimes very heavily guarded compounds, produces not only a particular shared appreciation of the world around them but also the site where memory and knowledge can be shared. Its boundaries also define the humanitarian sector for those who stand outside the barbed wires or witness the white cars fly by. As many have noted before, the continuities that exist (sometimes down to the same housing) between ex-colonial enclaves and the new NGO ones bear a considerable historical burden. In particular they invite the renewal or the reinvention of what de Certeau called 'tactics' – the manipulative engagement with humanitarians. In turn, these tactics might reinforce the siege mentality arising from living in defensive spaces. White cars with logos also reinforce a sense of distance and sensory deprivation. Here Smirl neglects some of the hidden economics attached to this mobile space. Cars are often rental vehicles, the drivers constitute a 'pool' of local expertise and mediation often vital to security practices, and the SUVs are often necessary to cross obstacles rather than mere symbols of excess. The fact that some large INGOs have become importers and modifiers of such vehicles would have warranted a more subtle engagement with the automotive technologies of aid.

Finally, the two chapters on Aceh and Katrina are meant to conclude this book and to demonstrate how Smirl's use of ANT and spatial awareness changes how we think about humanitarian work. In fact they represent a new departure towards architectural and planning issues as they concentrate on reconstruction. In Aceh, Smirl charts the now notorious attempts of the humanitarian international NGOs improvising themselves as real estate developers. She portrays them failing to cross the boundary between emergency housing and the modern housing developments. With the change of scale came the realisation that humanitarian gifts are sometimes grossly inappropriate. With the millions raised for the Tsunami the temptation to bequeath houses rather than tents, solid structures and permanent solutions revealed the profound complexities that relief work cannot but fail to engage with. Ironically the humanitarians concern with local housing styles and demotic architecture backfired when their 'beneficiaries' resented them as backward looking. Though Aceh revealed North-South tensions specific to contracting and resource transfers across cultures, the second case study of Katrina provided a counterpoint intended to illustrate that these tensions are those created by the chasm between donors and recipients' world views. Arguably any specialist of the USA would argue that specific North-South dimensions did exist in the aftermath of the hurricane too, but this stance makes an important point. This chapter focuses more on the blue prints and models for reconstruction, state and consumers than the international humanitarian system but it illustrates well how spatial policies embody historical inequality and profound patterns of racial discrimination.

These two case studies are also specific to the context of humanitarian aid at the interface of development and reconstruction work – much of her notions of humanitarian work apply exclusively to disaster relief and longer term reconstruction rather than emergency relief – bio hazard or war. What she would have made of the spaces produced around Ebola and its no-touch social interaction haunted my reading of this book.

In particular her research on reconstruction and disaster relief aid shaped a concept of space as auxiliary space (the spatial experience of aid shared by a fast turnover of expatriates) – a kind of 'bubble' defined by security and practical managerial requirements but which stands distinct from the 'local' environment. Lisa Smirl links this more innovative take on the humanitarian sector to a more conventional understanding of what she calls a humanitarian imaginary, which she argues is also spatial but much more abstract and programmatic. Finally a 'tactical' space which is the one inhabited by the recipients of aid – those who rebuild and reconstruct through and against the gifts they have received. Taken together, Smirl argues, one can trace the humanitarian work in a much more complex manner.

Smirl makes the point that, building on her own experience, these spaces are feeding each other and that one cannot simply break from the confines of auxiliary spaces to reach out the 'real world'. The global imaginary is indeed fed from within the auxiliary and its demands contribute, she argues to the narrowing of auxiliary spaces. The conclusions of this very stimulating book are not militant in narrow terms except in arguing that humanitarian knowledge production and action has to take into account the circumstances and boundaries within which it comes

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into being. The prospect of further research which might enlighten how processes of rebuilding in post disaster areas will do so may unfortunately remain unfulfilled. This promising and in many ways inspirational work will have to be continued by others.

About the author:

Bertrand Taithe is a Professor in Cultural History at the University of Manchester, where his main research concern is the history of humanitarianism. Since 1994 Bertrand has been an editor of *European Review of History- revue europeenne d'histoire*, and in 2009 he became a founding member and executive director of the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute which combines the research interests of colleagues in the humanities, and opens a dialogue with humanitarian workers and medical practitioners.